John Cottingham, Why Believe?

Why Believe?, John Cottingham, Continuum 2009, xiii+186pp., £14.99 hbk.

Well-known British philosopher John Cottingham here builds a case for the credibility of Christian belief that is aimed especially at agnostics. In so doing, he sharpens considerably the focus of his previous work, which has tended to address religious belief as an undifferentiated, generic category.

He begins by pointing out, lest skeptics forget, that we all depend on belief every day of our lives. Even the continuing existence of familiar people, objects and places in the state we last knew them rests on assumptions that are logically unjustifiable. We live inevitably as part of a network of belief. In nurturing Christian belief, Cottingham suggests, indirect strategies aimed at engaging this predisposition to believe, such as inviting unbelievers to church, might therefore merit greater attention than current mission theology often gives them.

Christ might also be approached via truth, beauty and goodness—normative notions, which 'carry with them the sense of a *requirement* or a *demand*' (p. 26). In chapter 2, Cottingham argues persuasively that these point to a universal moral teleology founded on divine reason and love. One aspect of this is the moral sense humans feel. The strength of normative feeling we sometimes experience suggests that ethics is not a product of mere feeling or personal preference. From this perspective, the radical contingency of ethics exhibited by the fact that different people have sometimes strongly contrasting ethical responses to similar facts shows that ethics is no trivial or relativistic matter, but based on true and powerful realities.

Chapter 3 tackles another issue: what ultimately separates Christian mystics from skeptics and atheists, given both maintain that God is unknowable? Cottingham finds that critics of the idea that God is completely transcendent have a point. Such a view indeed ends up in skepticism, if not atheism, and shows that revelation and incarnation, two fundamental Christian tenets, are structurally necessary to furnish belief with positive content.

The book then address obstacles to belief (pursued further in chapter 6), clearing ground for a highly illuminating discussion in chapter 5 of the role in belief of divine interventions in the form of communications between God and creatures and the disclosures of meaning these allow. Affirming Heidegger's notion that truth involves an act of unconcealment, Cottingham draws on Sarah Coakley's work to argue for the key importance of epistemic transformation as a prerequisite for witnessing the Resurrection, and by extension, for conversion to the Christian faith. This contrasts sharply with 'epistemic atomism', which demands definitive proof—but such proof, paradoxically, would not in itself impel repentance, mission, love, self-sacrifice, or any other normal corollary of Christian belief. Belief involves emotional change and acceptance of a new interpretive framework. The book's final chapter explores some implications of this for everyday life.

Does Cottingham succeed in reaching out to agnostics? Yes. This review cannot capture the subtlety of his exposition; moreover, the book is not as long as its pagination might suggest. It might even give committed believers a boost on an off-day.

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